

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Planning Update

Fall 2007

Public Input

We have been hearing from you!

Since our Comprehensive Conservation Planning (CCP) process began in October 2006, we have had 9 public scoping meetings, in East Haddam, CT; Wethersfield, CT; Hadley, MA; Chesterfield, MA; Norwich, VT; Island Pond, VT; Columbia, NH; Jefferson, NH; and Winchester, NH. The meetings were attended by 122 citizens. In addition, the Friends of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge hosted two public meetings to encourage more input, one in Longmeadow, Massachusetts (31 attendees) and one in Norwich, Vermont (43 attendees).

We have also widely distributed our workbooks and received 148 completed responses. A few were anonymous, but the others came from throughout the watershed and a few from "away." Vermonters were especially engaged, submitting over 40% of the workbooks, due in large part to interest in the Nulhegan Basin Division.

Highlights from the workbooks

It was clear that respondents enjoyed the outdoor recreation, the availability of open space, abundant fish and wildlife and valued the river itself and the presence of healthy ecosystems. A large majority of respondents identified overdevelopment as the most important problem facing the watershed, followed by pollution and the loss or degradation of habitats.

Respondents thought we should prioritize:

- the protection of large blocks of forest
- rare habitats
- wetlands
- federally-listed species

Tools which received the greatest support were:

- land acquisition
- purchase of development rights
- focused technical assistance on appropriate private lands
- focused management on appropriate refuge lands
- work with other agencies and conservation groups

As far as priority issues for the refuge,

Help us build additional alternatives!!

We are scheduling another round of meetings in December and January of this year to discuss how the specific proposed land acquisition areas, habitat management and public use activities and other proposed actions would vary under each management alternative that we will analyze as a part of the CCP process.

December 10 – Norwich, VT; 6:30-8:30 p.m. at the Montshire Museum

December 11 – Winchester, NH; 7-9 p.m. at the Town Hall

December 12 – Brattleboro, VT; 7-9 p.m. at the Marlboro College Graduate Center

December 17 – Colebrook, NH; 7-9 p.m. at the Colebrook Library

December 18 – Island Pond, VT; 7-9 p.m. at Brighton Pond Elementary

December 19 – Jefferson, NH; 7-9 p.m. at the Town Hall

December 20 – St. Johnsbury, VT; 7-9 p.m. at the St. Johnsbury School

January 8 – Hadley, MA; 7-9 p.m. at the USFWS Regional Office

Jan 10 – Chesterfield, MA; 7-9 p.m. at the Senior Center

Jan 14 – Middletown, CT; 7-9 p.m. at the Wesleyan College Science Hall

Jan 16 – Burlington, CT; 7-9 p.m. at the CTDEP Sessions Woods

Jan 17 – Old Lyme, CT; 7-9 p.m. at the CTDEP Marine Headquarters

New England in December and January always provides the potential for weather related issues!! In the event of inclement weather, call 877-289-8495 ext.8565 the day of the meeting for any weather related updates!

respondents ranked loss of habitat to development and habitat fragmentation as the top two issues.

The highest priority topics selected by workbook respondents for refuge educational efforts were:

- the impact of personal choices on ecosystem health
- resource stewardship
- the value of biodiversity
- wildlife/habitat concepts

For full work book results visit <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Conte/ccphome.html> or send us an email at northeastplanning@fws.gov.

Coordination with the Four Watershed States

We have had three meetings with our “core planning team,” which includes representatives from each of the four watershed state’s fish and wildlife and forest and parks agencies. In addition, we attended meetings with a broader cross-section of agency biologists in each state to gather information about each state’s wildlife action plan and discuss priority biological resources in the watershed.

Issues Raised in Scoping

The major issues seem to be:

1. What is the Refuge’s role in conservation?
 - a. Should the Refuge actively manage habitats or employ a more hands-off approach (e.g. wilderness)
 - b. What should be the level of land conservation (i.e. acquisition) in “...conserving, protecting, and enhancing the natural diversity...” of the Connecticut River Watershed?
 - c. What is the most effective way for the Refuge to allocate resources for invasive species management?
2. Which wildlife-dependent, priority public recreational uses should be allowed on Refuge divisions and units?
3. What, if any, non-priority recreational activities should be allowed on Refuge lands?
 - a. Are snowmobiling and vehicular access at Nulhegan and Pondicherry (snowmobiling only) appropriate and compatible with the Refuge Purposes and Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System?
 - b. Others? Examples identified by the public include bicycling, horses, canoe/kayaking, camping, trapping, cross-country skiing.

4. What role should partnerships play in fulfilling the Refuge’s purposes? Which issues are most suitable for partnership efforts?

5. How should broad-scale issues such as changes in climate and demographics be factored into the Conte CCP?

The most contentious issue seems to be the debate regarding motorized versus non-motorized access to refuge lands.

Socio-Economic Analysis

A preliminary socio-economic analysis shows that population in the Connecticut River Watershed counties has increased by 4.5%, or 91,546 people, between 1990 and 2006. This rate is not as high as the average rate in the four watershed states as a whole, which increased by 8.2%. However, certain counties are experiencing growth greater than the average growth of their respective states; Middlesex County (mouth of the river) in Connecticut, Grafton County in central New Hampshire, and Orange County in central Vermont. Coos County, in northern New Hampshire, actually lost 5.2% of its population between 1990 and 2006. The most

densely populated counties remain Hartford County, Connecticut and Hampden County, Massachusetts.

Almost all watershed counties have a lower per capita income and higher poverty rates than their respective state averages. In 2005, a majority of employment in the watershed counties was in the following four areas: government (13%), information, finance, insurance, and real estate (12.2%), health care and social assistance (12.1%), retail trade (11.1%), and professional, management, administration and waste services (10.6%). Farm-related employment was only .9%, and employment relating to forestry, fishing and other related activities was .2%. Construction and manufacturing both experienced significant decreases (declines of 32.8% and 12.8%, respectively) between 2001 and 2005.

Refuge Activities

We asked workbook respondents to tell us which activities that are currently offered they felt were valuable. The results are as follows.

Items that over 70% of respondents selected as valuable.

Walking/hiking on refuge lands
Birding or other wildlife observation on refuge lands.

Items that over 60% of respondents selected as valuable.

Environmental education and photography on refuge lands
Volunteer invasive plant control projects

Items that over 50% of respondents selected as valuable.

Invasive cooperative projects with partners in land protection
Fishing on refuge lands
Plant control workshops for landowners
Endangered species volunteer work
Environmental education/ Interpretation programs at off-refuge locations sponsored by the refuge
Invasive plant conferences
Hunting on refuge lands
Technical and financial assistance provided by the refuge
The exhibits at the Montshire Museum.

Alternatives

In planning for the future of Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge we need to consider a full range of alternatives. We have different tools available that can be used to achieve our habitat objectives. Some of the tools are: Service land acquisition and management, private lands work, and education and outreach.

For example, if maintaining cold, silt-free water for salmon eggs and fry in a particular stream is an objective, purchasing land in the headwaters area would allow USFWS to keep the area from being developed in perpetuity. Careful forest management of the land would minimize siltation while producing ideal habitat for a few of the highest priority bird species. As an alternative, instead of purchase and management of the headwaters land, we could work with groups of partners to obtain funds for land protection through other agency programs, like Forest Legacy or North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants, or work to educate private landowners in that stream's headwaters and try to get them to manage their land as in a way that would provide similar benefits.

Tradeoffs: Impacts of Alternatives

We are also required to analyze the effectiveness and costs of each alternative, along with any impacts to people and/or the environment. In this example, land purchase by the refuge, while more expensive up front, has the advantage of providing more certain habitat benefits over the long run. Because of the cost, less land might be influenced. However, accomplishments via fee acquisition do not preclude the application of less than fee efforts by other conservation entities. The alternative that encourages private land management for headwater benefits might be applicable to a larger area, but the results would be largely dependent upon private landowner participation. In addition, results might vary over time, depending on landowner cooperation and sale of property. Perhaps it would be successful at first but fail as development pressures increased and new forces within the market began to influence land uses. Outreach and education would require continual refuge staff expense to keep the program running as land changes hands over time.

DECEMBER AND JANUARY MEETINGS HELP US DESIGN ALTERNATIVES . . . !!!

The scoping meetings gave us an idea of what you value and support, and also your concerns. The next set of meetings is an opportunity for you to look at maps of areas that have been proposed by partners and the public as being important to the migratory species we need to protect. You can tell us which combination of tools might be applied in each area, and you can weigh in as to how you think the various areas compare.

"Trust Species"

The US Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the well-being of migratory birds, migratory fish and federally listed (as endangered or threatened) species. Species of highest concern while we are formulating our plan include:

Highest Priority Birds

wood thrush
American woodcock
American black duck
Canada goose - migratory
Atlantic populations
Canada warbler
bay-breasted warbler
Bicknell's thrush
prairie warbler
blue-winged warbler
blackrail

Fish and other aquatic species

Atlantic salmon
Shortnose sturgeon (also
endangered)
American shad
gizzard shad
blueback herring
alewife
striped bass
sea lamprey
American eel
Dwarf wedge mussel (also
endangered)

The Basic Question

What is the best combination of Service and partnership actions (conservation and/or education activities) to provide optimal habitats for these species in the watershed, while also providing optimal public opportunities to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, and participate in interpretation and environmental education?

Proposed Divisions

We have looked at the Special Focus Areas from our 1995 plan and also have received suggestions from the public, organizations and agencies. For a list of the areas that have been proposed, and maps, go to:
<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Conte/ccphome.html>

WHERE WILL WE START?

We have roughed out four alternatives to use as a starting point for discussions. We need to present a full range of alternatives, so in these examples, we have increased the levels of effort in five categories (land acquisition, management, partnership, education, and recreation) as the alternatives proceed from A to D. We are hoping that you will help us develop other alternatives that represent the most effective, efficient and desired combination of activities.

Alternative A

Land Acquisition – We would stop purchasing land (refuge remains at 32,347 acres).

Management – We would do minimal management; only that required to defend threatened and endangered species and meet other legislative and treaty obligations.

Partnerships – We would limit our partnerships to local projects on our lands and existing visitor centers

Education – Our outreach and education efforts would be limited as they currently are (no staff at Colebrook and Montshire Museum of Science and Great Falls Discovery Center only open 2 days a week)

Recreation – Public use would be available as it is now.

Staffing – We could manage this with our current staff levels: 8.5 employees.

Alternative B (No Action)

Land Acquisition – Projects that are underway would be completed; in addition to the completing the Nulhegan and Pondicherry Divisions, and Mt. Tom Unit, land acquisition would be actively pursued in the Mohawk River Division, Colebrook, NH; the Fort River Division, Hadley, MA; the Mill River Division, Northampton, MA; Station 43 Division, Windsor and East Windsor, CT; Dead Man's Swamp and Guildersleeve Island, Cromwell, CT and the Pyquag Division in Wethersfield, CT; and the Salmon River Division, in East Haddam and East Hampton, CT. (The refuge would grow to roughly 49,000 acres).

Management – We would manage for some priority species, but due to limited staff and financial resources, most habitat structure and composition would be determined by natural processes.

Partnerships – We would limit to localized efforts and perhaps a few high priority efforts.

Education – Outreach and education efforts would be limited as they are now.

Recreation – Public use would be available as it is now and some new divisions opened to public use as staffing allows.

Staffing – This alternative would require the addition of two staff to manage the additional lands. (10.5)

Alternatives (Continued)

Alternative C

Land acquisition – We would select and pursue the highest priority divisions through the Comprehensive Conservation Plan process (refuge grows to 78,390 acres).

Management – We would make a concerted effort to manage all lands as actively as necessary to optimize habitats for priority trust species (migratory fish, birds, and threatened and endangered species). We would increase biological work and invasive species management (add 2 staff).

Partnership – We would expand our partnership efforts with state agencies and organizations, establishing a private lands position (1 staff person) to work with coalitions of partners to secure funding from government funding sources (USDA, USGS, USEPA, etc.) and foundations to accomplish private land conservation and management projects. We would provide technical assistance to partners and private land owners with staff added above). We would fully-staff existing visitor centers and add a staff person to manage and operate the mobile exhibit so it could appear at schools, nature centers and events all over the watershed (add 5 staff).

Education – We would increase partnerships to build and deliver enhanced programming throughout the watershed (add 1 staff person in Hartford, CT area), and establish additional website resources and strategically located kiosks and “loaner” exhibits.

Recreation – We would open selected divisions and units to appropriate and compatible uses, effectively monitor and manage to minimize any impacts, and facilitate recreational activities that incorporate educational benefits (add ½ additional law enforcement officer).

Staffing – This would require a total of 20 employees.

Alternative D

Land Acquisition – We would establish most of the proposed divisions (refuge would eventually be over 100,000 acres in a dozen or more Divisions - to be determined in this process).

Management – We would manage all of our lands to restore and maintain biological integrity, diversity and health, (by aggressively controlling priority invasive species, for example). This could concurrently allow us to provide secondary and college students conservation experiences through expanded summer crews and internships (2 additional land managers).

Partnership – In addition to the partnership work described in Alternative C, there would be more work securing grants for local complimentary projects throughout the watershed (1 additional private lands/grants writers).

Outreach and Education – Outreach and education would be as in Alternative C, but we would also provide additional visitor contact stations at all Divisions and some Units (construction and maintenance costs, plus some additional staff), and provide more environmental education services to rural and urban school systems (2 Visitor Services Specialists could cover that many facilities and increase work with schools).

Recreation – For public use, most of the Divisions would be open as described in Alternative C, with more facilities offered (1 additional law enforcement officer).

Staffing – The total additional staffing to cover staffing some of the divisions and visitor centers would bring us to a total of 26 employees.